



CHAPTER I.
CHAPTER II.
CHAPTER III.
CHAPTER IV.
CHAPTER V.
CHAPTER VI.
CHAPTER VII.

The Moon of Skulls

by Robert E. Howard

1930

CHAPTER I.

A MAN COMES SEEKING

A great black shadow lay across the land, cleaving the red flame of the red sunset. To the man who toiled up the jungle trail it loomed like a symbol of death and horror, a menace brooding and terrible, like the shadow of a stealthy assassin flung upon some candle-lit wall.

Yet it was only the shadow of the great crag which reared up in front of him, the first outpost of the grim foothills which were his goal. He halted a moment at its foot, staring upward where it rose blackly limned against the dying sun. He could have sworn that he caught the hint of a movement at the top, as he stared, hand shielding his eyes, but the fading glare dazzled him and he could not be sure. Was it a man who darted to cover? A man, or not?

He shrugged his shoulders and fell to examining the rough trail which led up and over the brow of the crag. At first glance it seemed that only a mountain goat could scale it, but closer investigation showed numbers of finger holds drilled into the solid rock. It would be a task to try his powers to the utmost but he had not come a thousand miles to turn back now.

He dropped the large pouch he wore at his shoulder, and laid down the clumsy musket, retaining only his long rapier, dagger, and one of his pistols, these he strapped behind him, and without a backward glance over the darkening trail he had come, he started the long ascent.

He was a tall man, long-armed and iron-muscled, yet again and again he was forced to halt in his upward climb and rest for a moment, clinging like an ant to the precipitous face of the cliff. Night fell swiftly and the crag above him was a shadowy blur in which he was forced to feel with his fingers, blindly, for the holes which served him as a precarious ladder.

Below him, the night noises of the tropical jungle broke forth, yet it appeared to him that even these sounds were subdued and hushed as though

the great black hills looming above threw a spell of silence and fear even over the Jungle creatures.

On up he struggled, and now to make his way harder, the cliff bulged outward near its summit, and the strain on nerve and muscle became heart-breaking. Time and again a hold slipped and he escaped falling by a hair's breadth. But every fiber in his lean hard body was perfectly co-ordinated, and his fingers were like steel talons with the grip of a vice. His progress grew slower and slower but on he went until at last he saw the cliffy brow splitting the stars a scant twenty feet above him.

And even as he looked, a vague bulk heaved into view, toppled on the edge and hurtled down toward him with a great rush of air about it. Flesh crawling, he flattened himself against the cliff's face and felt a heavy blow against his shoulder, only a glancing blow, but even so it nearly tore him from his hold. And as he fought desperately to right himself, he heard a reverberating crash among the rocks far below. Cold sweat beading his brow, he looked up. Who--or what--had shoved that boulder over the cliff edge? He was brave, as the bones on many a battlefield could testify, but the thought of dying like a sheep, helpless and with no chance of resistance, turned his blood cold.

Then a wave of fury supplanted his fear and he renewed his climb with reckless speed. The expected second boulder did not come, however, and no living thing met his sight as he clambered up over the edge and leaped erect, sword flashing from its scabbard.

He stood upon a sort of plateau which debouched into a very broken hilly country some half mile to the west. The crag he had just mounted jutted out from the rest of the heights like a sullen promontory, looming above the sea of waving foliage below, now dark and mysterious in the tropic night.

Silence ruled here in absolute sovereignty. No breeze stirred the sombre depths below, and no footfall rustled amid the stunted bushes which cloaked the plateau, yet that boulder which had almost hurled the climber to his death had not fallen by chance. What beings moved among these grim

hills? The tropical darkness fell about the lone wanderer like a heavy veil through which the yellow stars blinked evilly. The steams of the rotting jungle vegetation floated up to him as tangible as a thick fog, and making a wry face he strode away from the cliff, heading boldly across the plateau, sword in one hand and pistol in the other.

There was an uncomfortable feeling of being watched in the very air. The silence remained unbroken save for the soft swishing that marked the stranger's cat-like tread through the tall upland grass, yet the man sensed that living things glided before and behind him and on each side. Whether man or beast trailed him he knew not, nor did he care over-much, for he was prepared to fight human or devil who barred his way. Occasionally he halted and glanced challengingly about him, but nothing met his eye except the shrubs which crouched like short dark ghosts about his trail, blended and blurred in the thick, hot darkness through which the very stars seemed to struggle, redly.

At last he came to the place where the plateau broke into the higher slopes and there he saw a clump of trees blocked out solidly in the lesser shadows. He approached warily, then halted as his gaze, growing somewhat accustomed to the darkness, made out a vague form among the sombre trunks which was not a part of them. He hesitated. The figure neither advanced nor fled. A dim form of silent menace, it lurked as if in wait. A brooding horror hung over that still cluster of trees.

The stranger advanced warily, blade extended. Closer. Straining his eyes for some hint of threatening motion, he decided that the figure was human but he was puzzled at its lack of movement. Then the reason became apparent--it was the corpse of a black man that stood among those trees, held erect by spears through his body, nailing him to the boles. One arm was extended in front of him, held in place along a great branch by a dagger through the wrist, the index finger straight as if the corpse pointed stiffly--back along the way the stranger had come. The meaning was obvious; that mute grim signpost could have but one significance--death lay beyond. The man who stood gazing upon that grisly warning rarely laughed, but now he allowed himself the luxury of a sardonic smile. A

thousand miles of land and sea--ocean travel and jungle travel--and now they expected to turn him back with such mummerly--whoever they were. He resisted the temptation to salute the corpse, as an action wanting in decorum, and pushed on boldly through the grove, half expecting an attack from the rear or an ambush. Nothing of the sort occurred, however, and emerging from the trees, he found himself at the foot of a rugged incline, the first of a series of slopes. He strode stolidly upward in the night, nor did he even pause to reflect how unusual his actions must have appeared to a sensible man. The average man would have camped at the foot of the crag and waited for morning before even attempting to scale the cliffs. But this was no ordinary man. Once his objective was in sight, he followed the straightest line to it, without a thought of obstacles, whether day or night. What was to be done, must be done. He had reached the outposts of the kingdom of fear at dusk, and invading its inmost recesses by night seemed to follow as a matter of course.

As he went up the boulder-strewn slopes the moon rose, lending its air of illusion, and in its light the broken hills ahead loomed up like the black spires of wizards' castles. He kept his eyes fixed on the dim trail he was following, for he knew not when another boulder might come hurtling down the inclines. He expected an attack of any sort and, naturally, it was the unexpected which really happened.

Suddenly from behind a great rock stepped a man, an ebony giant in the pale moonlight, a long spear blade gleaming silver in his hand, his headpiece of ostrich plumes floating above him like a white cloud. He lifted the spear in a ponderous salute, and spoke in the dialect of the river-tribes: "This is not the white man's land. Who is my white brother in his own kraal and why does he come into the Land of Skulls?"

"My name is Solomon Kane." the white man answered in the same language. "I seek the vampire queen of Negari."

"Few seek. Fewer find. None return," answered the other cryptically.

"Will you lead me to her?"

"You bear a long dagger in your right hand. There are no lions here."

"A serpent dislodged a boulder. I thought to find snakes in the bushes."

The giant acknowledged this interchange of subtleties with a grim smile and a brief silence fell.

"Your life," said the black man presently, "is in my hand." Kane smiled thinly. "I carry the lives of many warriors in my hand."

The negro's gaze travelled uncertainly up and down the shimmery length of the Englishman's sword. Then he shrugged his mighty shoulders and let his spear point sink to the earth.

"You bear no gifts," said he, "but follow me and I will lead you to the Terrible One, the Mistress of Doom, The Red Woman, Nakari, who rules the land of Negari."

He stepped aside, and motioned Kane to precede him, but the Englishman, his mind on a spear-thrust in the back, shook his head.

"Who am I that I should walk in front of my brother? We be two chiefs--let us walk side by side." In his heart Kane railed that he should be forced to use such unsavoury diplomacy with a savage warrior, but he showed no sign. The giant bowed with a certain barbaric majesty and together they went up the hill trail, unspeaking.

Kane was aware that men were stepping from hiding places and falling in behind them, and a surreptitious glance over his shoulder showed him some two score warriors trailing out behind them in two wedge-shaped lines. The moonlight glittered on sleek bodies, on waving headgears and long, cruel spear blades.

"My brothers are like leopards," said Kane courteously; "they lie in the low bushes and no eyes see them; they steal through the high grass and no man hears their coming."

The black chief acknowledged the compliment with a courtly inclination of his lion-like head, that set the plumes whispering.

"The mountain leopard is our brother, oh chieftain. Our feet are like drifting smoke but our arms are like iron. When they strike, blood drips red and men die."

Kane sensed an undercurrent of menace in the tone. There was no actual hint of threat on which he might base his suspicions, but the sinister minor note was there. He said no more for a space and the strange band moved silently upward in the moonlight like a cavalcade of spectres.

The trail grew steeper and more rocky, winding in and out among crags and gigantic boulders. Suddenly a great chasm opened before them, spanned by a natural bridge of rock, at the foot of which the leader halted.

Kane stared at the abyss curiously. It was some forty feet wide, and looking down, his gaze was swallowed by impenetrable blackness, hundreds of feet deep, he knew. On the other side rose crags dark and forbidding.

"Here," said the chief, "begin the true borders of Nakari's realm."

Kane was aware that the warriors were casually closing in on him. His fingers instinctively tightened about the hilt of the rapier which he had not sheathed. The air was suddenly super-charged with tension.

"Here, too," The warrior chief said, "they who bring no gifts to Nakari--die!"

The last word was a shriek, as if the thought had transformed the speaker into a maniac, and as he screamed it, the great arm went back and then forward with a ripple of mighty muscles, and the long spear leaped at Kane's breast.

Only a born fighter could have avoided that thrust. Kane's instinctive action saved his life--the great blade grazed his ribs as he swayed aside and

returned the blow with a flashing thrust that killed a warrior who jostled between him and the chief at that instant.

Spears flashed in the moonlight and Kane, parrying one and bending under the thrust of another, sprang out upon the narrow bridge where only one could come at him at a time.

None cared to be first. They stood upon the brink and thrust at him, crowding forward when he retreated, giving hack when he pressed them. Their spears were longer than his rapier but he more than made up for the difference and the great odds by his scintillant skill and the cold ferocity of his attack.

They wavered back and forth and then suddenly a giant leaped from among his fellows and charged out upon the bridge like a wild buffalo, shoulders hunched, spear held low eyes gleaming with a look not wholly sane. Kane leaped back before the onslaught, leaped back again, striving to avoid that stabbing spear and to find an opening for his point. He sprang to one side and found himself reeling on the edge of the bridge with eternity gaping beneath him. The warriors yelled in savage exultation as he swayed and fought for his balance, and the giant on the bridge roared and plunged at his rocking foe.

Kane parried with all his strength--a feat few swordsmen could have accomplished, off balance as he was--saw the cruel spear blade flash by his cheek--felt himself falling backward into the abyss. A desperate effort; and he gripped the spear shaft, righted himself and ran the spearman through the body. The giant's great red cavern of a mouth spouted blood and with a dying effort he hurled himself blindly against his foe. Kane, with his heels over the bridge's edge, was unable to avoid him and they toppled over together, to disappear silently into the depths below.

So swiftly had it all happened that the warriors stood stunned. The giant's roar of triumph had scarcely died on his lips before the two were falling into the darkness. Now the rest of the natives came out on the bridge to peer down curiously, but no sound came up from the dark void.

CHAPTER II.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STALKING DEATH

As Kane fell he followed his fighting instinct, twisting in midair so that when he struck, were it ten or a thousand feet below, he would land on top of the man who fell with him.

The end came suddenly--much more suddenly than the Englishman had thought for. He lay half stunned for an instant, then looking up, saw dimly the narrow bridge banding the sky above him, and the forms of the warriors, limned in the moonlight and grotesquely foreshortened as they leaned over the edge. He lay still, knowing that the beams of the moon did not pierce the deeps in which he was hidden, and that to those watchers he was invisible. Then when they vanished from view he began to review his present plight. His opponent was dead, and only for the fact that his corpse had cushioned the fall, Kane would have been dead likewise, for they had fallen a considerable distance. As it was, the Englishman was stiff and bruised.

He drew his sword from the native's body, thankful that it had not been broken, and began to grope about in the darkness. His hand encountered the edge of what seemed a cliff. He had thought that he was on the bottom of the chasm and that its impression of great depth had been a delusion, but now he decided that he had fallen on a ledge, part of the way down. He dropped a small stone over the side, and after what seemed a very long time he heard the faint sound of its striking far below.

Somewhat at a loss as to how to proceed, he drew flint and steel from his belt and struck them to some tinder, warily shielding the light with his hands. The faint illumination showed a large ledge jutting out from the side of the cliff, that is, the side next the hills, to which he had been attempting to cross. He had fallen close to the edge and it was only by the narrowest margin that he had escaped sliding off it, not knowing his position.

Crouching there, his eyes seeking to accustom themselves to the abysmal gloom, he made out what seemed to be a darker shadow in the shadows of the wall. On closer examination he found it to be an opening large enough to admit his body standing erect. A cavern, he assumed, and though its appearance was dark and forbidding in the extreme, he entered, groping his way when the tinder burned out.

Where it led to, he naturally had no idea, but any action was preferable to sitting still until the mountain vultures plucked his bones. For a long way the cave floor tilted upward--solid rock beneath his feet--and Kane made his way with some difficulty up the rather steep slant, slipping and sliding now and then. The cavern seemed a large one, for at no time after entering it could he touch the roof, nor could he, with a hand on one wall, reach the other.

At last the floor became level and Kane sensed that the cave was much larger there. The air seemed better, though the darkness was just as impenetrable. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks. From somewhere in front of him there came a strange indescribable rustling. Without warning something smote him in the face and slashed wildly. All about him sounded the eerie murmurings of many small wings and suddenly Kane smiled crookedly, amused, relieved and chagrined. Bats, of course. The cave was swarming with them. Still, it was a shaky experience, and as he went on and the wings whispered through the vast emptiness of the great cavern, Kane's mind found space to dally with a bizarre thought--had he wandered into Hell by some strange means, and were these in truth bats, or were they lost souls winging through everlasting night? Then, thought Solomon Kane, I will soon confront Satan himself--and even as he thought this, his nostrils were assailed by a horrid scent, fetid and repellent. The scent grew as he went slowly on, and Kane swore softly, though he was not a profane man. He sensed that the smell betokened some hidden threat, some unseen malevolence, inhuman and deathly, and his sombre mind sprang at supernatural conclusions. However, he felt perfect confidence in his ability to cope with any fiend or demon, armoured as he was in unshakable faith of creed and the knowledge of the rightness of his cause. What followed happened suddenly. He was groping his way along

when in front of him two narrow yellow eyes leaped up in the darkness—eyes that were cold and expressionless, too hideously close-set for human eyes and too high for any four-legged beast. What horror had thus reared itself up in front of him?

This is Satan, thought Kane as the eyes swayed above him, and the next instant he was battling for his life with the darkness that seemed to have taken tangible form and thrown itself about his body and limbs in great slimy coils. Those coils lapped his sword arm and rendered it useless; with the other hand he groped for dagger or pistol, flesh crawling as his fingers slipped from Slick scales, while the hissing of the monster filled the cavern with a cold paean of terror.

There in the black dark to the accompaniment of the bats' leathery rustlings, Kane fought like a rat in the grip of a mouse-snake, and he could feel his ribs giving and his breath going before his frantic left hand closed on his dagger hilt.

Then with a volcanic twist and wrench of his steel-thewed body he tore his left arm partly free and plunged the keen blade again and again to the hilt in the sinuous writhing terror which enveloped him, feeling at last the quivering coils loosen and slide from his limbs to lie about his feet like huge cables.

The mighty serpent Lashed wildly in its death struggles, and Kane, avoiding its bone-shattering blows, reeled away in the darkness, labouring for breath, If his antagonist had not been Satan himself, it had been Satan's nearest earthly satellite, thought Solomon, hoping devoutly that he would not be called upon to battle another in the darkness there.

It seemed to him that he had been walking through the blackness for ages and he began to wonder if there were any end to the cave when a glimmer of light pierced the darkness. He thought it to be an outer entrance a great way off, and started forward swiftly, but to his astonishment, he brought up short against a blank wall after taking a few strides.

Then he perceived that the light came through a narrow crack in the wall, and feeling over this wall he found it to be of different material from the rest of the cave, consisting, apparently, of regular blocks of stone joined together with mortar of some sort--an indubitably man-built wall. The light streamed between two of these stones where the mortar had crumbled away. Kane ran his hands over the surface with an interest beyond his present needs. The work seemed very old and very much superior to what might be expected of a tribe of ignorant savages. He felt the thrill of the explorer and discoverer. Certainly no white man had ever seen this place and lived to tell of it, for when he had landed on the dank West Coast some months before, preparing to plunge into the interior, he had had no hint of such a country as this. The few white men who knew anything at all of Africa with whom he had talked, had never even mentioned the "Land of Skulls, or the she-fiend who ruled it.

Kane thrust against the wall cautiously. The structure seemed weakened from age--a vigorous shove and it gave perceptibly. He hurled himself against it with all his weight--and a whole section of wall gave way with a crash, precipitating him into a dimly lighted corridor amid a heap of stone, dust and mortar.

He sprang up and looked about, expecting the noise to bring a horde of wild spearmen. Utter silence reigned. The corridor in which he now stood was much like a long narrow cave itself, save that it was the work of man. It was several feet wide and the roof was many feet above his head. Dust lay ankle-deep on the floor as if no foot had trod there for countless centuries, and the dim light, Kane decided, filtered in somehow through the roof or ceiling, for nowhere did he see any doors or windows. At last he decided the source was the ceiling itself, which was of a peculiar phosphorescent quality.

He set off down the corridor, feeling uncomfortably like a grey ghost moving along the grey halls of death and decay. The evident antiquity of his surroundings depressed him, making him sense vaguely the fleeting and futile existence of mankind. That he was now on top of the earth he believed, since light of a sort came in, but where, he could not even offer a

conjecture. This was a land of enchantmentâ€”a land of horror and fearful mysteries, the jungle and river natives had said, and he had gotten whispered hints of, its terrors ever since he had set his back to the Slave Coast and ventured into the hinterlands alone. Now and then he caught a low indistinct murmur which seemed to come through one of the walls, and he at last came to the conclusion that he had stumbled onto a secret passage in some castle or house. The natives who had dared speak to him of Negari, had whispered of a ju-ju city built of stone, set high amid the grim black crags of the fetish hills.

Then, thought Kane, it may be that I have blundered upon the very thing I sought and am in the midst of that city of terror. He halted, and choosing a place at random, began to loosen the mortar with his dagger. As he worked he again heard that low murmur, increasing in volume as he bored through the wall, and presently the point pierced through, and looking through the aperture it had made, he saw a strange and fantastic scene.

He was looking into a great chamber, whose walls and floors were of stone, and whose mighty roof was upheld by gigantic stone columns, strangely carved. Ranks of feathered black warriors lined the walls and a double column of them stood like statues before a throne set between two stone dragons which were larger than elephants. These men he recognized, by their bearing and general appearance, to be tribesmen of the warriors he had fought at the chasm. But his gaze was drawn irresistibly to the great, grotesquely ornamented throne. There, dwarfed by the ponderous splendour about her, a woman reclined. A tawny woman she was, young and of a tigerish comeliness. She was naked except for a be plumed helmet, armbands, anklets and a girdle of coloured ostrich feathers, and she sprawled upon the silken cushions with her limbs thrown about in voluptuous abandon. Even at that distance Kane could make out that her features were regal yet barbaric, haughty and Imperious, yet sensual, and with a touch of ruthless cruelty about the curl of full red lips. Kane felt his pulse quicken. This could be no other than she whose crimes had become almost mythical--Nakari of Negari, demon queen of a demon city, whose monstrous lust for blood had set half a continent shivering. At least she seemed human enough; the tales of the fearful river tribes had lent her a

supernatural aspect. Kane had half expected to see a loathsome semi-human monster out of some past and demoniacal age.

The Englishman gazed, fascinated though repelled. Not even in the courts of Europe had he seen such grandeur. The chamber and all its accoutrements, from the carven serpents twined about the bases of the pillars to the dimly seen dragons on the shadowy ceiling, were fashioned on a gigantic scale. The splendour was awesomeâ€”elephantineâ€”inhumanly oversized, and almost numbing to the mind which sought to measure and conceive the magnitude thereof. To Kane it seemed that these things must have been the work of gods rather than men, for this chamber alone would dwarf most of the castles he had known in Europe.

The fighting men who thronged that mighty room seemed grotesquely incongruous. They wereâ€”not the architects of that ancient place. As Kane realized this the sinister importance of Queen Nakari dwindled. Sprawled on that august throne in the midst of the terrific glory of another age, she seemed to assume her true proportions, a spoiled, petulant child engaged in a game of make-believe and using for her sport a toy discarded by her elders. And at the same time a thought entered Kane's mindâ€”who were these elders? Still, the child could become deadly in her game, as the Englishman soon saw. A tall and massive warrior came through the ranks fronting the throne, and after prostrating himself four times before it, remained on his knees, evidently waiting permission to speak. The queen's air of lazy indifference fell from her and he straightened with a quick lithe motion that reminded Kane of a leopardess springing erect. She spoke, and the words came faintly to him as he strained his faculties to hear. She spoke in a language very similar to that of the river tribes.

"Speak!"

"Great and Terrible One," said the kneeling warrior, and Kane recognized him as the chief who had first accosted him on the plateau--the chief of the guards on the cliffs, "let not the fire of your fury consume your slave." The young woman's eyes narrowed viciously.

"You know why you were summoned, son of a vulture?"

"Fire of Beauty, the stranger called Kane brought no gifts."

"No gifts?" she spat out the words. "What have I to do with gifts?" The chief hesitated, knowing now that there was some special importance in this stranger.

"Gazelle of Negari, he came climbing the crags in the night like an assassin, with a dagger as long as a man's arm in his hand. The boulder we hurled down missed him, and we met him upon the plateau and took him to the Bridge-Across-the-Sky, where, as is the custom, we thought to slay him; for it was your word that you were weary of men who came wooing you."

"Fool," she snarled. "Fool!"

"Your slave did not know, Queen of Beauty. The strange man fought like a mountain leopard. Two men he slew and fell with the last one into the chasm, and so he perished, Star of Negari."

"Aye," the queen's tone was venomous. "The first great man who ever came to Negari! One who might haveâ€”rise, fool!"*

The man got to his feet.

"Mighty Lioness, might not this one have come seekingâ€”"

The sentence was never completed. Even as he straightened, Nakari made a swift gesture with her hand. Two warriors plunged from the silent ranks and two spears crossed in the chief's body before he could turn. A gurgling scream burst from his lips, blood spurted high in the air and the corpse fell flatly at the foot of the great throne.

The ranks never wavered, but Kane caught the sidelong flash of strangely red eyes and the involuntary wetting of thick lips. Nakari had half risen as the spears flashed, and now she sank back, an expression of cruel

satisfaction on her beautiful face and a strange brooding gleam in her scintillant eyes.

An indifferent wave of her hand and the corpse was dragged away by the heels, the dead arms trailing limply in the wide smear of blood left by the passage of the body. Kane could see other wide stains crossing the stone floor, some almost indistinct, others less dim. How many wild scenes of blood and cruel frenzy had the great stone throne-dragons looked upon with their carven eyes?

He did not doubt, now, the tales told him by the river tribes. These people were bred in rapine and horror. Their prowess had burst their brains. They lived, like some terrible beast, only to destroy. There were strange gleams behind their eyes which at times lit those eyes with up-leading flames and shadows of Hell. What had the river tribes said of these mountain people who had ravaged them for countless centuries?

"That they were henchmen of death, who stalked among them, and whom they worshipped." Still the thought hovered in Kane's mind as he watched--who built this place, and why were these people evidently in possession? Fighting men such as they were could not have reached the culture evidenced by these carvings. Yet the river tribes had spoken of no other men than those upon which he now looked. The Englishman tore himself away from the fascination of the barbaric scene with an effort. He had no time to waste; as long as they thought him dead, he had more chance of eluding possible guards and seeking what he had come to find. He turned and set off down the dim corridor. No plan of action offered itself to his mind and one direction was as good as another. The passage did not run straight; it turned and twisted, following the line of the walls, Kane supposed, and found time to wonder at the evident enormous thickness of those walls. He expected at any moment to meet some guard or slave, but as the corridors continued to stretch empty before him, with the dusty floors unmarked by any footprint, he decided that either the passages were unknown to the people of Negari or else for some reason were never used.

He kept a close lookout for secret doors, and at last found one, made fast on the inner side with a rusty bolt set in a groove of the wall. This he manipulated cautiously, and presently with a creaking which seemed terrifically loud in the stillness the door swung inward. Looking out he saw no one, and stepping warily through the opening, he drew the door to behind him, noting that it assumed the part of a fantastic picture painted on the wall. He scraped a mark with his dagger at the point where he believed the hidden spring to be on the outer side, for he knew not when he might need to use the passage again.

He was in a great hall, through which ran a maze of giant pillars much like those of the throne chamber. Among them he felt like a child in some great forest, yet they gave him some slight sense of security since he believed that, gliding among them like a ghost through a jungle, he could elude the warriors in spite of their craft.

He set off, choosing his direction at random and going carefully. Once he heard a mutter of voices, and leaping upon the base of a column, clung there while two women passed directly beneath him. but besides these he encountered no one. It was an uncanny sensation, passing through this vast hall which seemed empty of human life, but in some other part of which Kane knew there might be throngs of people, hidden from sight by the pillars.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of following these monstrous mazes, he came upon a huge wall which seemed to be either a side of the hall, or a partition, and continuing along this, he saw in front of him a doorway before which two spearmen stood like black statues.

Kane, peering about the corner of a column base, made out two windows high in the wall, one on each side of the door, and noting the ornate carvings which covered the walls, determined on a desperate plan.

He felt it imperative that he should see what lay within that room. The fact that it was guarded suggested that the room beyond the door was either a treasure chamber or a dungeon, and he felt sure that his ultimate goal would

prove to be a dungeon.

Kane retreated to a point out of sight of the guards and began to scale the wall, using the deep carvings for hand and foot holds. It proved even easier than he had hoped, and having climbed to a point level with the windows, he crawled cautiously along a horizontal line, feeling like an ant on a wall. The guards far below him never looked up, and finally he reached the nearer window and drew himself up over the sill. He looked down into a large room, empty of life, but equipped in a manner sensuous and barbaric. Silken couches and velvet cushions dotted the floor in profusion, and tapestries heavy with gold work hung upon tile walls. The ceiling too was worked in gold.

Strangely incongruous, crude trinkets of ivory and ironwood, unmistakably savage in workmanship, littered the place, symbolic enough of this strange kingdom where signs of barbarism vied with a strange culture. The outer door was shut and in the wall opposite was another door, also closed.

Kane descended from the window, sliding down the edge of a tapestry as a sailor slides down a sail-rope, and crossed the room. His feet sank noiselessly into the deep fabric of the rug which covered the floor, and which, like all the other furnishings, seemed ancient to the point of decay.

At the door he hesitated. To step into the next room might be a desperately hazardous thing to do; should it prove to be filled with warriors, his escape was cut off by the spearman outside the other door. Still, he was used to taking all sorts of wild chances, and now, sword in hand, he flung the door open with a suddenness intended to numb with surprise for an instant any foe who might be on the other side. Kane took a swift step within, ready for anything—then halted suddenly, struck speechless and motionless for a second. He had come thousands of miles in search of something, and there before him lay the object of his search.

CHAPTER III.

LILITH

A couch stood in the middle of the room, and on its silken surface lay a woman—a woman whose skin was fair and whose reddish gold hair fell about her bare shoulders. She now sprang erect, fright flooding her fine grey eyes, lips parted to utter a cry which she as suddenly checked.

"You!" she exclaimed. "How did you?"

Solomon Kane closed the door behind him and came toward her, a rare smile on his dark face.

"You remember me, do you not, Marylin?"

The fear had already faded from her eyes even before he spoke, to be replaced by a look of incredible wonder and dazed bewilderment.

"Captain Kane! I can not understand—it seemed no one would ever come"

She drew a small hand wearily across her brow, swaying suddenly.

Kane caught her in his arms—she was only a child—and laid her gently on the couch. There, chafing her wrists gently, he talked in a low hurried monotone, keeping an eye on the door all the time—which door, by the way, seemed to be the only entrance or egress from the room. While he talked he mechanically took in the chamber, noting that it was almost a duplicate of the outer room as regards hangings and general furnishings.

"First," said he, "before, we go into any other matters, tell me, are you closely guarded?"

"Very closely, sir," she murmured hopelessly, "I know not how you came here, but we can never escape."

"Let me tell you swiftly how I came to be here, and mayhap you will be more hopeful when I tell you of the difficulties already overcome. Lie still now, Marylin. and I will tell you how I came to seek an English heiress in the devil city of Negari.

"I killed Sir John Taferel in a duel. As to the reason, 'tis neither here nor there, but slander and a black lie lay behind it. Ere he died he confessed that he had committed a foul crime some years ago. You remember, of course, the affection cherished for you by your cousin, old Lord Hildred Taferal, Sir John's uncle? Sir John feared that the old lord, dying without issue, might leave the great Taferal estates to you.

"Years ago you disappeared and Sir John spread the rumour that you had drowned. Yet when he lay dying with my rapier through his body, he gasped out that he had kidnapped you and sold you to a Barbary rover, whom he namedâ€”a bloody pirate whose name has not been unknown on England's coasts aforetime. So I came seeking you, and a long weary trail it has been, stretching into long leagues and bitter years.

"First I sailed the seas searching for El Gar, the Barbary corsair named by Sir John. I found him in the crash and roar of an ocean battle; he died, but even as he lay dying he told me that he had sold you in turn to a merchant out of Stamboul. So to the Levant I went and there by chance came upon a Greek sailor whom the Moors had crucified on the shore for piracy. I cut him down and asked him the question I asked all men--if he had in his wanderings seen a captive English girl-child with yellow curls. I learned that he had been one of the crew of the Stamboul merchant's, and that she had, on her homeward voyage, been set upon by a Portuguese slaver and sunk--this renegade Greek and the child being among the few who were taken aboard the slaver.

"This slaver then, cruising south for black ivory, had been ambushed in a small bay on the African West Coast, and of your further fate the Greek knew nothing, for he had escaped the general massacre, and taking to sea in an open boat, had been taken up by a ship of Genoese freebooters.

"To the West Coast, then, I came, on the slim chance that you still lived, and there heard among the natives that some years ago a white child had been taken from a ship whose crew had been slain, and sent inland as a part of the tribute the shore tribes paid to the upper river chiefs.

"Then all traces ceased. For months I wandered without a clue as to your whereabouts, nay, without a hint that you even lived. Then I chanced to hear among the river tribes of the demon city Negari and the evil queen who kept a foreign woman for a slave. I came here."

Kane's matter-of-fact tone, his unfurnished narration, gave no hint of the full meaning of that tale--of what lay behind those calm and measured words--the sea-fights and the land fights--the years of privation and heart-breaking toil, the ceaseless danger, the everlasting wandering through hostile and unknown lands, the tedious and deadening labour of ferreting out the information he wished from ignorant, sullen and unfriendly savages.

"I came here," said Kane simply, but what a world of courage and effort was symbolized by that phrase! A long red trail, black shadows and crimson shadows weaving a devils dance--marked by flashing swords and the smoke of battle--by faltering words falling like drops of blood from the lips of dying men.

Not a consciously dramatic man, certainly, was Solomon Kane. He told his tale in the same manner in which he had overcome terrific obstacles--coldly, briefly and without heroics.

"You see, Marilyn," he concluded gently, "I have not come this far and done this much, to now meet with defeat. Take heart, child. We will find a way out of this fearful place."

"Sir John took me on his saddlebow." the girl said dazedly, and speaking slowly as if her native language came strangely to her from years of unuse, as she framed in halting words an English evening of long ago. "He carried me to the seashore where a galley's boat waited, filled with fierce men, dark and moustached and waving scimitars, and great rings to the fingers. The

captain, a Moslem with a face like a hawk, took me, I a-weeping with fear, and bore me to his galley. Yet he was kind to me in his way. I being little more than a baby, and at last sold me to a Turkish merchant, as he told you. This merchant he met off the southern coast of France, after many days of sea travel.

"This man did not use me badly, yet I feared him, for he was a man of cruel countenance and made me understand that I was to be sold to a black sultan of the Moors. However, in the Gates of Hercules his ship was set upon by a Cadiz slaver and things came about as you have said.

"The captain of the slaver believed me to be the child of some wealthy English family and intended holding me for ransom, but in a grim darksome bay on the African coast he perished with all his men except the Greek you have mentioned, and I was taken captive by a savage chieftain.

"I was terribly afraid and thought he would slay me, but he did me no harm and sent me upcountry with an escort, who also bore much loot taken from the ship. This loot, together with myself, was, as you know, intended for a powerful king of the river peoples. But it never reached him, for a roving band of Negari fell upon the beach warriors and slew them all. Then I was taken to this city, and have since remained, slave to Queen Nakari.

"How I have lived through all those terrible scenes of battle and cruelty and murder, I know not."

"A providence has watched over you, child," said Kane, "the power which doth care for weak women and helpless children; which led me to you in spite of all hindrances, and which shall yet lead us forth from this place, God willing."

"My people!" she exclaimed suddenly like one awaking from a dream; "what of them?"

"All in good health and fortune, child, save that they have sorrowed for you through the long years. Nay, old Sir Mildred hath the gout and doth so

swear thereat that I fear for his soul at times. Yet methinks that the sight of you, little Marylin, would mend him."

"Still, Captain Kane," said the girl, "I can not understand why you came alone."

"Your brothers would have come with me, child, but it was not sure that you lived, and I was loth that any other Taferal should die in a land far from good English soil. I rid the country of an evil Taferal" 'twas but just I should restore in his place a good Taferal, if so be she still lived--I, and I alone."

This explanation Kane himself believed. He never sought to analyse his motives and he never wavered once his mind was made up. Though he always acted on impulse, he firmly believed that all his actions were governed by cold and logical reasonings. He was a man born out of his time--a strange blending of Puritan and Cavalier, with a touch of the ancient philosopher, and more than a touch of the pagan, though the last assertion would have shocked him unspeakably. An atavist of the days of blind chivalry he was, a knight errant in the sombre domes of a fanatic. A hunger in his soul drove him on and on, an urge to right all wrongs, protect all weaker things, avenge all crimes against right and justice. Wayward and restless as the wind, he was consistent in only one respect--he was true to his ideals of justice and right. Such was Solomon Kane.

"Marylin," he now said kindly, taking her small hands in his sword-calloused fingers, "methinks you have changed greatly in the years. You were a rosy and chubby little maid when I used to dandle you on my knee in old England. Now you seem drawn and pale of face, though you are beautiful as the nymphs of the heathen books. There are haunting ghosts in your eyes child--do they misuse you here?"

She lay back on the couch and the blood drained slowly from her already pallid features until she was deathly white. Kane bent over her, startled. Her voice came in a whisper.

"Ask me not. There are deeds better hidden in the darkness of night and forgetfulness. There are sights which blast the eyes and leave their burning mark forever on the brain. The walls of ancient cities, recked not of by men, have looked upon scenes not to be spoken of, even in whispers."

Her eyes closed wearily and Kane's troubled, sombre eyes unconsciously traced the thin blue lines of her veins, prominent against the unnatural whiteness of her skin.

"Here is some demoniacal thing," he muttered. "a mysteryâ€"

"Aye," murmured the girl, "a mystery that was old when Egypt was young! And nameless evil more ancient than dark Babylon--that spawned in terrible black cities when the world was young and strange."

Kane frowned, troubled. At the girl's strange words he felt an eery crawling fear at the back of his brain, as if dim racial memories stirred in the eon-deep gulfs, conjuring up grim chaotic visions, illusive and nightmarish.

Suddenly Marylin sat erect, her eyes flaring wide with fright. Kane heard a door open somewhere.

"Nakari!" whispered the girl urgently.

"Swift! She must not find you here! Hide quickly, and"--as Kane turned--"keep silent, whatever may chance!"

She lay back on the couch, feigning slumber as Kane crossed the room and concealed himself behind some tapestries which, hanging upon the wall, hid a niche that might have once held a statue of some sort.

He had scarcely done so when the single door of the room opened and a strange barbaric figure stood framed in it. Nakari, queen of Negari, had come to her slave.

The woman was clad as she had been when he had seen her on the throne, and the coloured armlets and anklets clanked as she closed the door behind her and came into the room. She moved with the easy sinuousness of a she-leopard and in spite of himself the watcher was struck with admiration for her lithe beauty. Yet at the same time a shudder of repulsion shook him, for her eyes gleamed with vibrant and magnetic evil, older than the world.

"Lilith!" thought Kane. "She is beautiful and terrible as Purgatory. She is Lilith--that foul, lovely woman of ancient legend."

Nakari halted by the couch, stood looking down upon her captive for a moment, then with an enigmatic smile, bent and shook her. Marilyn opened her eyes, sat up, then slipped from her couch and knelt before her savage mistress--an act which caused Kane to curse beneath his breath. The queen laughed and, seating herself upon the couch, motioned the girl to rise, and then put an arm about her waist and drew her upon her lap. Kane watched, puzzled, while Nakari caressed the girl in a lazy, amused manner. This might be affection, but to Kane it seemed more like a sated leopard teasing its victim. There was an air of mockery and studied cruelty about the whole affair.

"You are very soft and pretty, Mara," Nakari murmured lazily, "much prettier than the other girls who serve me. The time approaches, little one, for your nuptial. And a fairer bride has never been borne up the Black Stairs."

Marilyn began to tremble and Kane thought she was going to faint. Nakari's eyes gleamed strangely beneath her long-lashed drooping lids, and her full red lips curved in a faint tantalizing smile. Her every action seemed fraught with some sinister meaning. Kane began to sweat profusely.

"Mara," said the queen, "you are honoured above all other girls, and yet you are not content. Think how the girls of Negari will envy you, Mara, when the priests sing the nuptial song and the Moon of Skulls looks over the black crest of the Tower of Death. Think, little bride-of-â€”the-Master, how many girls have given their lives to be his bride!"

And Nakari laughed in her hateful, musical way as at a rare jest. And then suddenly she stopped short. Her eyes narrowed to slits as they swept the room, and her whole body tensed. Her hand went to her girdle and came away with a long thin dagger. Kane sighted along the barrel of his pistol, finger against the trigger. Only a natural hesitancy against shooting a woman kept him from sending death into the savage heart of Nakari, for he believed that she was about to murder the girl.

Then, with a lithe, cat-like motion, she thrust the girl from her knees and bounded back across the room, her eyes fixed with blazing intensity on the tapestry behind which Kane stood. Had those keen eyes discovered him? He quickly learned.

"Who is there?" she rapped out fiercely.

"Who hides behind those hangings? I do not see you nor hear you, but I know someone is there!" Kane remained silent. Nakari's wild beast instinct had betrayed him, and he was uncertain as to what course to follow. His next actions depended on the queen.

"Mara!" Nakari's voice slashed like a whip, "who is behind those hangings? Answer me! Shall I give you a taste of the whip again?" The girl seemed incapable of speech. She cowered where she had fallen, her beautiful eyes full of terror. Nakari, her blazing gaze never wavering, reached behind her with her free hand and gripped a cord hanging from the wall. She jerked viciously. Kane felt the tapestries whip back on either side of him and he stood revealed. For a moment the strange tableau held--the gaunt adventurer in his blood-stained, tattered garments, the long pistol gripped in his right hand--across the room the savage queen in her barbaric finery, one arm still lifted to the cord, the other hand holding the dagger in front of her--the imprisoned girl cowering on the floor. Then Kane spoke: "Keep silent, Nakari, or you die!" The queen seemed numbed and struck speechless by the sudden apparition. Kane stepped from among the tapestries and slowly approached her.

"You!" she found her voice at last. "You must be he of whom the guardsmen spake! There are not two other white men in Negari! They said you fell to your death! How then?"

"Silence!" Kane's voice cut in harshly on her amazed babblings; he knew that the pistol meant nothing to her, but she sensed the threat of the long blade in his left hand. "Marylin," still unconsciously speaking in the river tribes' language, "take cords from the hangings and bind her!" He was about the middle of the chamber now. Nakari's face had lost much of its helpless bewilderment and into her blazing eyes stole a crafty gleam. She deliberately let her dagger fall as in token of surrender, then suddenly her hands shot high above her head and gripped another thick cord. Kane heard Marylin scream, but before he could pull the trigger or even think, the floor fell beneath his feet and he shot down into abysmal blackness. He did not fall far and he landed on his feet; but the force of the fall sent him to his knees and even as he went down, sensing a presence in the darkness beside him, something crashed against his skull and he dropped into a yet blacker abyss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IV.

DREAMS OF EMPIRE

Slowly Kane drifted back from the dim realms where the unseen assailant's bludgeon had hurled him. Something hindered the motion of his hands, and there was a metallic clanking when he sought to raise them to his aching, throbbing head. He lay in utter darkness, but he could not determine whether this was absence of light, or whether he was still blinded by the blow. He dazedly collected his scattered faculties and realized that he was lying on a damp stone floor, shackled by wrist and ankle with heavy iron chains which were rough and rusty to the touch.

How long he lay there, he never knew. The silence was broken only by the drumming pulse in his own aching head and the scamper and chattering of rats. At last a red glow sprang up in the darkness and grew before his eyes. Framed in the grisly radiance rose the sinister and sardonic face of Nakari. Kane shook his head, striving to rid himself of the illusion. But the light grew and as his eyes accustomed themselves to it, he saw that it emanated from a torch borne in the hand of the queen.

In the illumination he now saw that he lay in a small dank cell whose walls, ceiling and floor were of stone. The heavy chains which held him captive were made fast to metal rings set deep in the wall. There was but one door, which was apparently of bronze.

Nakari set the torch in a niche near the door, and coming forward, stood over her captive, gazing down at him in a manner rather speculating than mocking.

"You are he who fought the men on the cliff." The remark was an assertion rather than a question. "They said you fell into the abyss" did they lie? Did you bribe them to lie? Or how did you escape? Are you a magician and did you fly to the bottom of the chasm and then fly to my palace? Speak!"

Kane remained silent. Nakari cursed.

"Speak or I will have your eyes torn out! I will cut your fingers off and burn your feet!" She kicked him viciously, but Kane lay silent, his deep sombre eyes boring up into her face, until the feral gleam faded from her eyes to be replaced by an avid interest and wonder.

She seated herself on a stone bench, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands.

"I never saw a white man before," she said.

"Are all white men like you? Bah! That cannot be! Most men are fools, black or white. I know that white men are not gods as the river tribes say--they are only men. I, who know all the ancient mysteries, say they are only men.

"But white men have strange mysteries too, they tell me--the wanderers of the river tribes and Mara. They have war clubs that make a noise like thunder and kill afar off--that thing which you held in your right hand, was that one of those clubs?"

Kane permitted himself a grim smile.

"Nakari, if you know all mysteries, how can I tell you aught that you know not already?"

"How deep and cold and strange your eyes are!" the queen said as if he had not spoken.

"How strange your whole appearance is--and you have the bearing of a king! You do not fear me--I never met a man who neither loved nor feared me. You would never fear me, but you could learn to love me. Look at me, bold one--am I not beautiful?"

"You are beautiful," answered Kane

Nakari smiled and then frowned. "The way you say that, it is no compliment. You hate me, do you not?"

"As a man hates a serpent," Kane replied bluntly.

Nakari's eyes blazed with almost insane fury. Her hands clenched until the long nails sank into the palms; then as quickly as her anger had arisen, it ebbed away.

"You have the heart of a king." she said calmly, "else you would fear me. Are you a king your land?"

"I am only a landless wanderer."

"You might be a king here," Nakari said slowly. Kane laughed grimly. "Do you offer me my life?"

"I offer you more than that!" Kane's eyes narrowed as the queen leaned toward him, vibrant with suppressed excitement.

"Kane, what is it that you want more than anything else in the world? "

"To take the white girl you call Mara, and go." Nakari sank back with an impatient exclamation.

"You can not have her; she is the promised bride of the Master. Even I could not save her. I even if I wished. Forget her. I will help you forget her. Listen, listen to the words of Nakari, queen of Negari! You say you are a landless man--I will make you a king! I will give you the world for a toy! No, no keep silent until I have finished." She rushed on, her words tumbling over each other in her eagerness. Her eyes blazed, her whole body quivered with dynamic intensity. "I have talked to travellers, to captives and slaves, men from far countries. I know that this land of mountains and rivers and jungle is not all the world. There are far-off nations and cities, and kings and queens to be crushed and broken."

"Negari is fading, her might is crumbling, but a strong man beside her queen might build it up again--might restore all her vanishing glory. Listen, Kane! Sit by me on the throne of Negari! Send afar to your people for the thunder - clubs to arm my warriors! My nation is still lord of central Africa. Together we will band the conquered tribes--call back the days when the realm of ancient Negari spanned the land from sea to sea! We will subjugate all the tribes of the river, the plain and the sea-shore, and instead of slaying them all, we will make one mighty army of them! And then, when all Africa is under our heel, we will sweep forth upon the world like a hungry lion to rend and tear and destroy!"

Solomon's brain reeled. Perhaps it was the woman's fierce magnetic personality, the dynamic power she instilled in her fiery words, but at the moment her wild plan seemed not at all wild and impossible. Lurid and chaotic visions flamed through the Puritan's brain--Europe torn by civil and religious strife, divided against herself, betrayed by her rulers, tottering--aye, Europe was in desperate straits now, and might prove an easy victim for some strong savage race of conquerors. What man can say truthfully that in his heart there lurks not a yearning for power and conquest?

For a moment the Devil sorely tempted Solomon Kane. Then before his mind's eye rose the wistful, sad face of Marylin Taferal, and Solomon cursed.

"Out on ye, daughter of Satan! Avaunt! Am I a beast of the forest to lead your savage devils against mine own people? Nay, no beast ever did so. Begone! If you wish my friendship, set me free and let me go with the girl."

Nakari leaped like a tiger-cat to her feet, her eyes flaming now with passionate fury. A dagger gleamed in her hand and she raised it high above Kane's breast with a feline scream of hate. A moment she hovered like a shadow of death above him; then her arm sank and she laughed. "Freedom? She will find her freedom when the Moon of Skulls leers down on the black altar. As for you, you shall rot in this dungeon. You are a fool; Africa's greatest queen has offered you her love and the empire of the world--and

you revile her! You love the slave girl, perhaps? Until the Moon of Skulls she is mine and I leave you to think about this: that she shall be punished as I have punished her before--hung up by her wrists, naked, and whipped until she swoons!"

Nakari Laughed as Kane tore savagely at his shackles. She crossed to the door, opened it, then hesitated and turned back for another word.

"This is a foul place, bold one, and maybe you hate me the more for chaining you here. Maybe in Nakari's beautiful throne room, with wealth and luxury spread before you, you will look upon her with more favour. Very soon I shall send for you, but first I will leave you here awhile to reflect. Remember--love Nakari and the kingdom of the world is yours; hate her--this cell is your realm."

The bronze door clanged sullenly, but more hateful to the imprisoned Englishman was venomous, silvery laugh of Nakari.

Time passed slowly in the darkness. After what seemed a long time the door opened again, this time to admit a huge warrior who brought food and a sort of thin wine. Kane ate and drank ravenously and afterward slept. The strain of the last few days had worn him greatly, mentally and physically, but when he awoke he felt fresh and strong,

Again the door opened and two great savage warriors entered. In the light of the torches they bore, Kane saw that they were giants, clad in loin-cloths and ostrich plume headgear, and bearing long spears in their hands.

"Nakari wishes you to come to her, white man," was all they said, as they took off his shackles. He arose, exultant in even brief freedom, his keen brain working fiercely for a way of escape.

Evidently the fame of his prowess had spread, for the two warriors showed great respect for him. They motioned him to precede them, and walked carefully behind him, the points of their spears boring into his back. Though they were two to one, and he was unarmed, they were taking no

chances. The gazes they directed at him were full of awe and suspicion.

Down a long, dark corridor they went, his captors guiding him with light prods of their spears, up a narrow winding stair, down another passageway, up another stair, and then they emerged into the vast maze of gigantic pillars into which Kane had first come. As they started down this huge hall, Kane's eyes suddenly fell on a strange and fantastic picture painted on the wall ahead of him. His heart gave a sudden leap as he recognized it. It was some distance in front of him and he edged imperceptibly toward the wall until he and his guards were walking along very close to it. Now he was almost abreast of the picture and could even make out the mark his dagger had made upon it.

The warriors following Kane were amazed to hear him gasp suddenly like a man struck by a spear. He wavered in his stride and began clutching at the air for support.

They eyed each other doubtfully and prodded him, but he cried out like a dying man and slowly crumpled to the floor, where he lay in a strange, unnatural position, one leg doubled back under him and one arm half supporting his lolling body.

The guards looked at him fearfully. To all appearances he was dying, but there was no wound upon him. They threatened him with their spears, but he paid no heed. Then they lowered their weapons uncertainly and one of them bent over him.

Then it happened. The instant the guard stooped forward. Kane came up like a steel spring released. His right fist following his motion curved up from the hip in a whistling half-circle and crashed against the warrior's jaw. Delivered with all the power of arm and shoulder, propelled by the upthrust of the powerful legs as Kane straightened, the blow was like that of a sling's shot. The guard slumped to the floor, unconscious before his knees gave way.

The other warrior plunged forward with a bellow, but even as his victim fell, Kane twisted, aside and his frantic hand found the secret spring in the painting and pressed.

All happened in the breath of a second. Quick as the warrior was, Kane was quicker, for he moved with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf. For an instant the falling body of the senseless, guard hindered the other warrior's thrust, and in that instant Kane felt the hidden door give way. From the corner of his eye he saw a long gleam of steel shooting for his heart. He twisted about and hurled himself against the door, vanishing through it even as the stabbing spear slit the skin on his shoulder.

To the dazed and bewildered warrior, standing there with weapon upraised for another thrust, it seemed as if his prisoner had simply vanished through a solid wall, for only a fantastic picture met his gaze and this did not give to his efforts.

CHAPTER V.

"FOR A THOUSAND YEARS--"

Kane slammed the hidden door shut behind him, jammed down the spring and for a moment leaned against it, every muscle tensed, expecting to hold it against the efforts of a horde of spearmen. But nothing of the sort materialized. He heard his guard fumbling outside for a time; then that sound, too, ceased. It seemed impossible that these people should have lived in this palace as long as they had without discovering the secret doors and passages, but it was a conclusion which forced itself upon Kane's mind. At last he decided that he was safe from pursuit for the time being, and turning, started down the long, narrow corridor with its eon-old dust and its dim grey light. He felt baffled and furious, though he was free from Nakari's shackles. He had no idea how long he had been in the palace; it seemed ages. It must be day now, for it was light in the outer halls and he had seen no torches after they had left the subterranean dungeons. He wondered if Nakari had carried out her threat of vengeance on the helpless girl, and swore passionately. Free for the time being, yes; but unarmed and hunted through this infernal palace like a rat. How could he aid either himself or Marylin? But his confidence never faltered. He was in the right and some way would present itself. Suddenly a narrow stairway branched off the main passageway, and up this he went, the light growing stronger and stronger until he stood in the full glare of the African sunlight. The stair terminated in a sort of small landing directly in front of which was a tiny window, heavily barred. Through this he saw the blue sky tinted gold with the blazing sunlight, the sight was like wine to him and he drew in deep breaths of fresh, untainted air, breathing deep as if to rid his lungs of the aura of dust and decayed grandeur through which he had been passing.

He was looking out over a weird and bizarre landscape. Far to the right and the left loomed up great black crags and beneath them there reared castles and towers of stone, of strange architecture--it was as if giants from some other planet had thrown them up in a wild and chaotic debauch of creation. These buildings were backed solidly against the cliffs, and Kane knew that Nakari's palace also must be built into the wall of the crag behind it. He

seemed to be in the front of that palace in a sort of minaret built on the outer wall. But there was only one window in it and his view was limited.

Far below him through the winding and narrow streets of that strange city, swarms of people went to and fro, seeming like black ants to the watcher above. East, north and south, the cliffs formed a natural bulwark; only to the west was a built wall.

The sun was sinking west. Kane turned reluctantly from the barred window and went down the stairs again. Again he paced down the narrow grey corridor, aimlessly and planlessly, for what seemed miles and miles. He descended lower and lower into passages that lay below passages. The light grew dimmer, and a dank slime appeared on the walls. Then Kane halted, a faint sound from beyond the wall arresting him. What was that? A faint rattle--the rattle of chains.

Kane leaned close to the wall, and in the semi-darkness his hand encountered a rusty spring. He worked at it cautiously and presently felt the hidden door it betokened swing inward. He gazed out warily.

He was looking into a cell, the counterpart of the one in which he had been confined. A smouldering torch was thrust into a niche on the wall, and by its lurid and flickering light he made out a form on the floor, shackled wrist and ankle as he had been shackled.

A man; at first Kane thought him to be a native, but a second glance made him doubt. His skin was dark, but his features were finely chiselled, and he possessed a high, magnificent forehead, hard vibrant eyes, and straight dark hair.

The man spoke in an unfamiliar dialect, one which was strangely distinct and clear-cut in contrast to the guttural jargon of the natives with whom Kane was familiar. The Englishman spoke in English, and then in the language of the river tribes.

"You who come through the ancient door," said the other in the latter dialect, "who are you? You are no savage--at first I thought you one of the Old Race, but now I see you are not as they. Whence come you?"

"I am Solomon Kane," said the Puritan, "a prisoner in this devil-city. I come from far across the blue salt sea."

The man's eyes lighted at the word.

"The sea! The ancient and everlasting! The sea which I have never seen, but which cradled the glory of my ancestors! Tell me, stranger, have you, like they, sailed across the breast of the great blue monster, and have your eyes looked on the golden spires of Atlantis and the crimson walls of Mu?"

"Truly," answered Solomon uncertainly. "I have sailed the seas, even to Hindostan and Cathay, but of the countries you mention I know nothing."

"Nay," the other sighed. "I dream--I dream. Already the shadow of the great night falls across my brain and my words wander. Stranger, there have been times when these cold walls and floor have seemed to melt into green, surging deeps and my soul was filled with the deep booming of the everlasting sea. I who have never seen the sea!"

Kane shuddered involuntarily. Surely this man was insane. Suddenly the other shot out a withered, claw-like hand and gripped his arm, despite the hampering chain.

"You whose skin is so strangely fair! Have you seen Nakari, the she-fiend who rules this crumbling city?"

"I have seen her," said Kane grimly, "and now I flee like a hunted rat from her murderers."

"You hate her !" the other cried. "Ha, I know! You seek Mara, the white girl who is her slave?"

"Aye."

"Listen," the shackled one spoke with strange solemnity; "I am dying. Nakari's rack has done its work. I die and with me dies the shadow of the glory that was my nation's. For I am the last of my race. In all the world there is none like me. Hark now, to the voice of a dying race."

And Kane leaning there in the flickering semi-darkness of the cell heard the strangest tale to which man has ever listened, brought out of the mist of the dim dawn ages by the lips of delirium. Clear and distinct the words fell from the dying man and Kane alternately burned and froze as vista after gigantic vista of time and space swept up before him.

"Long eons ago--ages, ages ago--the empire of my race rose proudly above the waves. So long ago was it that no man remembers an ancestor who remembered it. In a great land to the west our cities rose. Our golden spires split the stars; our purple-prowed galleys broke the waves around the world, looting the sunset for its treasure and the sunrise for its wealth.

"Our legions swept forth to the north and to the south, to the west and the east, and none could stand before them. Our cities banded the world; we sent our colonies to all lands to subdue all savages, men of all colours, and enslave them. They toiled for us in the mines and at the galley's oars. All over the world the people of Atlantis reigned supreme. We were a sea-people, and we delved the deeps of all the oceans. The mysteries were known to us, and the secret things of land and sea and sky. We read the stars and were wise. Sons of the sea, we exalted him above all others.

"We worshipped Valka and Hotah, Honen and Golgor. Many virgins, many strong youths, died on their altars and the smoke of the shrines blotted out the sun. Then the sea rose and shook himself. He thundered from his abyss and the thrones of the world fell before him! New lands rose from the deep and Atlantis and Mu were swallowed up by the gulf. The green sea roared through the fanes and the castles, and the sea-weed encrusted the golden spires and the topaz towers. The empire of Atlantis vanished and was forgotten, passing into the everlasting gulf of time and oblivion. Likewise

the colony cities in barbaric lands, cut off from their mother kingdom, perished. The savage barbarians rose and burned and destroyed until in all the world only the colony city of Negari remained as a symbol of the lost empire.

"Here my ancestors ruled as kings, and the ancestors of Nakari--the she-cat--bent the knee of slavery to them. Years passed, stretching into centuries. The empire of Negari dwindled. Tribe after tribe rose and flung off the chains, pressing the lines back from the sea, until at last the sons of Atlantis gave way entirely and retreated into the city itself--the last stronghold of the race. Conquerors no longer, hemmed in by ferocious tribes, yet they held those tribes at bay for a thousand years. Negari was invincible from without; her walls held firm; but within evil influences were at work. The sons of Atlantis had brought their slaves into the city with them. The rulers were warriors, scholars, priests, artisans; they did no menial work. For that they depended upon the slaves. There were more of these slaves than there were masters. And they increased while the sons of Atlantis dwindled.

"They mixed with each other more and more as the race degenerated until at last only the priestcraft was free of the taint of savage blood. Rulers sat on the throne of Negari who possessed little of the blood of Atlantis, and these allowed more and more wild tribesmen to enter the city in the guise of servants, mercenaries and friends.

"Then came a day when these fierce slaves revolted and slew all who bore a trace of the blood of Atlantis, except the priests and their families. These they imprisoned as 'fetish people'. For a thousand years savages have ruled in Negari, their kings guided by the captive priests, who though prisoners, were yet the masters of kings." Kane listened enthralled. To his imaginative mind, the tale burned and lived with strange fire from cosmic time and space.

"After all the sons of Atlantis, save the priests, were dead, there rose a great king to the defiled throne of ancient Negari. He was a tiger and his warriors were like leopards. They called themselves Negari, ravishing even the name

of their former masters, and none could stand before them. They swept the land from sea to sea, and the smoke of destruction put out the stars. The great river ran red and the new lords of Negari strode above the corpses of their tribal foes. Then the great king died and the empire crumbled, even as the Atlantean kingdom of Negari had crumbled.

"They were skilled in war. The dead sons of Atlantis, their former masters, had trained them well in the ways of battle, and against the wild tribesmen they were invincible. But only the ways of war had they learned, and the empire was torn with civil strife. Murder and intrigue stalked redhanded through the palaces and the streets, and the boundaries of the empire dwindled and dwindled. All the while, savage kings with red, frenzied brains sat on the throne, and behind the curtains, unseen but greatly feared, the Atlantean priests guided the nation, holding it together, keeping it from absolute destruction.

"Prisoners in the city were we, for there was nowhere else in the world to go. We moved like ghosts through the secret passages in the walls and under the earth, spying on intrigue and doing secret magic. We upheld the cause of the royal family--the descendants of that tiger-like king of long ago--against all plotting chiefs, and grim are the tales which these silent walls could tell.

"These savages are not like the other natives of the region. A latent insanity lurks in the brains of every one. They have tasted so deeply and so long of slaughter and victory that they are as human leopards, forever thirsting for blood. On their myriad wretched slaves they have sated all lusts and desires until they have become foul and terrible beasts, forever seeking some new sensation, forever quenching their fearful thirsts in blood.

"Like a lion have they lurked in these crags for a thousand years, to rush forth and ravage the jungle and river people, enslaving and destroying. They are still invincible from without, though their possessions have dwindled to the very walls of this city, and their former great conquests and invasions have dwindled to raids for slaves.

"But as they faded, so too faded their secret masters, the Atlantean priests. One by one they died, until only I remained. In the last century they too have mixed with their rulers and slaves, and nowâ€”oh, the shame upon me!--I, the last son of Atlantis, bear in my veins the taint of barbarian blood. They died; I remained, doing magic and guiding the savage kings, I the last priest of Negari. Then the she-fiend, Nakari, arose."

Kane leaned forward with quickened interest. New life surged into the tale as it touched upon his own time.

"Nakari!" the name was spat as a snake hisses; "slave and the daughter of a slave! Yet she prevailed when her hour came and all the royal family died.

"And me, the last son of Atlantis, me she prisoned and chained. She feared not the silent Atlantean priests, for she was the daughter of a Satellite--one of the lesser, native priests. They were men who did the menial work of the masters--performing the lesser sacrifices, divining from the livers of fowls and serpents and keeping the holy fires for ever burning. Much she knew of us and our ways, and evil ambition burned in her.

"As a child she danced in the March of the New Moon, and as a young girl she was one of the Starmaidens. Much of the lesser mysteries was known to her, and more she learned, spying upon the secret rites of the priests who enacted hidden rituals that were old when the earth was young.

"For the remnants of Atlantis secretly kept alive the old worships of Valka and Hotah, Honen and Golgor, long forgotten and not to be understood by these savage people whose ancestors died screaming on their altars. Alone of all the savage Negari, she feared us not. Nakari not only overthrew the king and set herself on the throne, but she dominated the priests--the Satellites and the few Atlantean masters who were left. All these last, save me, died beneath the daggers of her assassins or on her racks. She alone of all the myriad savage thousands who have lived and died between these walls guessed at the hidden passages and subterranean corridors, secrets which we of the priestcraft had guarded jealously from the people for a thousand years.

"Ha! Ha! Blind, savage fools! To pass an ageless age in this city, yet never to learn of the secrets thereof! Apes--fools! Not even the lesser priests know of the long grey corridors, lit by phosphorescent ceilings, through which in bygone ages strange forms have glided silently. For our ancestors built Negari as they built Atlantis on a mighty scale and with an unknown art. Not for men alone did we build, but for the gods who moved unseen among us. And deep the secrets these ancient walls hold!

"Torture could not wring these secrets from our lips, but shackled in her dungeons, we trod our hidden corridors no more. For years the dust has gathered there, untouched by human foot, while we, and finally I alone, lay chained in these foul cells. And among the temples and the dark, mysterious shrines of old, move vile Satellites, elevated by Nakari to glories that were once mine--for I am the last Atlantean high priest.

"Their doom is ascertained, and red will be their ruin! Valka and Golgor, gods lost and forgotten, whose memory shall die with me, strike down their walls and humble them unto the dust! Break the altars of their blind pagan gods â€œ"

Kane realized that the man was wandering in his mind. The keen brain had begun to crumble at last.

"Tell me," said he, "you mentioned the fair girl. Mara. What do you know of her?"

"She was brought to Negari years ago by raiders," the other answered, "only a few years after the rise of the savage queen, whose slave she is. Little of her I know, for shortly after her arrival. Nakari turned on me--and the years that lie between have been grim dark years, shot red with torture and agony. Here I have lain, hampered by my chains from escape which lay in that door through which you entered--and for the knowledge of which Nakari has torn me on racks and suspended me over slow fires."

Kane shuddered. "You know not if they have so misused the white girl? Her eyes are haunted, and she has wasted away."

"She has danced with the Starmaidens at Nakari's command, and has looked on the bloody and terrible rites of the Black Temple. She has lived for years among a people with whom blood is cheaper than water, who delight in slaughter and foul torture, and such sights as she has looked upon would blast the eyes and wither the flesh of strong men. She has seen the victims of Nakura die amid horrid torments, and the sight is burned forever in the brain of the beholder. The rites of the Atlanteans the savages took whereby to honour their own crude gods, and though the essence of those rites is lost in the wasting years, yet even Nakari's minions perform them, they are not such as men can look on unshaken."

Kane was thinking: "A fair day for the world when this Atlantis sank, for most certainly it bred a race of strange and unknown evil." Aloud he said; "Who is this Master of whom Nakari spake, and what meant she by calling Mara his bride?"

"Nakura--Nakura, the skull of evil, the symbol of Death that they worship. What know these savages of the gods of sea-girt Atlantis? What know they of the dread and unseen gods whom their masters worshipped with majestic and mysterious rites? They understand not of the un-seen essence, the invisible deity that reigns in the air and the elements; they must worship a material object, endowed with human shape. Nakura was the last great wizard of Atlantean Negari. A renegade he was, who conspired against his own people and aided the revolt of the savages. In life they followed him and in death they deified him. High in the Tower of Death his fleshless skull is set, and on that skull hinge the brains of all the people of Negari.

"Nay, we of Atlantis worshipped Death, but we likewise worshipped Life. These people worship only Death and call themselves Sons of Death. And the skull of Nakura has been to them for a thousand years the symbol of their power, the evidence of their greatness.

"Do you mean," Kane broke in impatiently on these ramblings, "that they will sacrifice the girl to their god?"

"In the Moon of Skulls she will die on the Black Altar."

"What in God's name is this Moon of Skulls?" Kane cried passionately.

"The full moon. At the full of each moon, which we name the Moon of Skulls, a virgin dies on the Black Altar before the Tower of Death, where centuries ago, virgins died in honour of Golgor, the god of Atlantis. Now from the face of the tower that once housed the glory of Golgor, leers down the skull of the renegade wizard, and the people believe that his brain still lives therein to guide the star of the city. For look ye, stranger, when the full moon gleams over the rim of the tower and the chant of the priests falls silent, then from the skull of Nakura thunders a great voice, raised in an ancient Atlantean chant, and the people fall on their faces before it.

"But hark, there is a secret way, a stair leading up to a hidden niche behind the skull, and there a priest lurks and chants. In days gone by one of the sons of Atlantis had this office, and by all rights of men and gods it should be mine this day. For though we sons of Atlantis worshipped our ancient gods in secret, these savages would have none of them. To hold our power we were devotees to their foul gods and we sang and sacrificed to him whose memory we cursed.

"But Nakari discovered the secret, known before only to the Atlantean priests, and now one of her Satellites mounts the hidden stair and yammers forth the strange and terrible chant which is but meaningless gibberish to him, as to those who hear it. I, and only I, know its grim and fearful meaning."

Kane's brain whirled in his efforts to formulate some plan of action. For the first time during the whole search for the girl, he felt himself against a blank wall. The palace was a labyrinth. a maze in which he could decide no direction. The corridors seemed to run without plan or purpose, and how could he find Marylin, prisoned as she doubtless was in one of the myriad chambers or cells? Or had she already passed over the borderline of life, or succumbed to the brutal torture-lust of Nakari?

He scarcely heard the ravings and mutterings of the dying man.

"Stranger, do you indeed live or are you but one of the ghosts which have haunted me of late, stealing through the darkness of my cell? Nay, you are flesh and blood--but you are a savage, even as Nakari's race are savages. Eons ago when your ancestors were defending their caves against the tiger and the mammoth, with crude spears of flint, the gold spires of my people split the stars! They are gone and forgotten, and the world is a waste of barbarians. Let me, too, pass as a dream that is forgotten in the mists of the ages!" Kane rose and paced the cell. His fingers closed like steel talons as on a sword hilt and a blind red wave of fury surged through his brain. Oh God! to get his foes before the keen blade that had been taken from him--to face the whole city, one man against them all -

Kane pressed his hands against his temples.

"The moon was nearly full when last I saw it. But I know not how long ago that was. I know not how long I have been in this accursed palace, or how long I lay in that dungeon where Nakari threw me. The time of full moon may be past, and--oh merciful God!--Marylin may be dead already."

"Tonight is the Moon of Skulls," muttered the other, "I heard one of my jailers speak of it."

Kane gripped the dying man's shoulder with unconscious force.

"If you hate Nakari or love mankind, in God's name tell me how to save the child."

"Love mankind?" the priest laughed insanely.

"What has a son of Atlantis and a priest of forgotten Golgor to do with love? What are mortals but food for the jaws of the gods? Softer girls than your Mara have died screaming beneath these hands and my heart was as iron to their cries. Yet hate"--the strange eyes flamed with fearful light--"for hate I will tell you what you wish to know!"

"Go to the Tower of Death when the moon is risen. Slay the false priest who lurks behind the skull of Nakura, and then when the chanting of the worshippers below ceases, and the masked slayer beside the Black Altar raises the sacrificial dagger, speak in a loud voice that the people can understand, bidding them set free the victim and offer up instead, Nakari, queen of Negari!"

"As for the rest, afterward you must rely on your own craft and prowess if you come free."

Kane shook him.

"Swift! Tell me how I am to reach this tower!"

"Go back through the door whence you came." The man was sinking fast, his words dropped to whispers. "Turn to the left and go a hundred paces. Mount the stair you come to, as high as it goes. In the corridor where it ceases go straight for another hundred paces, and when you come to what seems a blank wall, feel over it until you find a projecting spring. Press this and enter the door which will open. You will then be out of the palace and in the cliffs against which it is built, and in the only one of the secret corridors known to the people of Negari. Turn to your right and go straight down the passage for five hundred paces. There you will come to a stair, which leads up to the niche behind the skull. The Tower of Death is built into the cliff and projects above it. There are two stairs--"

Suddenly the voice trailed out. Kane leaned forward and shook the man, and the priest suddenly rose up with a great effort. His eyes blazed with a wild and unearthly light and he flung his shackled arms wide.

"The sea!" he cried in a great voice. "The golden spires of Atlantis and the sun on the deep blue waters! I come!"

And as Kane reached to lay him down again, he slumped back, dead.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHATTERING OF THE SKULL

Kane wiped the cold sweat from his pale brow as he hurried down the shadowy passage. Outside this horrible palace it must be night. Even now the full moon--the grim Moon of Skulls--might be rising above the horizon. He paced off a hundred paces and came upon the stair the dying priest had mentioned. This he mounted, and coming into the corridor above, he measured off another hundred paces and brought up short against what appeared to be a door-less wall. It seemed an age before his frantic fingers found a piece of projecting metal. There was a creak of rusty hinges as the hidden door swung open and Kane looked into a passageway darker than the one in which he stood.

He entered, and when the door shut behind him he turned to his right and groped his way along for five hundred paces. There the corridor was lighter; light sifted in from without, and Kane discerned a stairway. Up this he went for several steps, then halted, baffled. At a sort of landing the stairway became two, one leading away to the left, the other to the right. Kane cursed. He felt that he could not afford to make a mistake--time was too precious--but how was he to know which would lead him to the niche where the priest hid?

The Atlantean had been about to tell him of these stairs when struck by the delirium which precedes death, and Kane wished fervently that he had lived only a few moments longer.

At any rate, he had no time to waste; right or wrong, he must chance it. He chose the right hand stair and ran swiftly up it. No time for caution now.

He felt instinctively that the time of sacrifice was close at hand. He came into another passage and discerned by the change in masonry that he was out of the cliffs again and in some building--presumably the Tower of Death. He expected any moment to come upon another stair, and suddenly his expectations were realized--but instead of up, it led down. From

somewhere in front of him Kane heard a vague, rhythmic murmur and a cold hand gripped his heart. The chanting of the worshippers before--the Black Altar!

He raced forward recklessly, rounded a turn in the corridor, brought up short against a door and looked through a tiny aperture. His heart sank. He had chosen the wrong stair and had wandered into some other building adjoining the Tower of Death.

He looked upon a grim and terrible scene. In a wide open space before a great black tower whose spire rose above the crags behind it, two long lines of savage dancers swayed and writhed. Their voices rose in a strange meaningless chant, and they did not move from their tracks.

From their knees upward their bodies swayed in fantastic rhythmical motions, and in their hands torches tossed and whirled, shedding a lurid shifting red light over the scene. Behind them were ranged a vast concourse of people who stood silent.

The dancing torchlight gleamed on a sea of glittering eyes and eager faces, In front of the dancers rose the Tower of Death, gigantically tall, black and horrific. No door or window opened in its face, but high on the wall in a sort of ornamented frame there leered a grim symbol of death and decay. The skull of Nakura! A faint, eery glow surrounded it, lit somehow from within the tower, Kane knew, and wondered by what strange art the priests had kept the skull from decay and dissolution so long.

But it was neither the skull nor the tower which gripped the Puritan's horrified gaze and held it. Between the converging lines of yelling, swaying worshippers there rose a great black altar. On this altar lay a slim, white shape.

"Marylin!" the word burst from Kane's lips in a great sob.

For a moment he stood frozen, helpless, struck blind. No time now to retrace his steps and find the niche where the skull priest lurked.

Even now a faint glow was apparent behind the spire of the tower, etching that spire blackly against the sky. The moon had risen. The chant of the dancers soared up to a frenzy of sound, and from the silent watchers behind them began a sinister low rumble of drums. To Kane's dazed mind it seemed that he looked on some red debauch of a lower Hell.

What ghastly worship of past eons did these perverted and degenerate rites symbolize? Kane knew that these people aped the rituals of their former masters in their crude way, and even in his despair he found time to shudder at the thought of what those original rites must have been.

Now a fearful shape rose up beside the altar where lay the silent girl. A tall figure, entirely naked save for a hideous painted mask on his face and a great head-dress of waving plumes. The drone of the chant sank low for an instant, then rose up again to wilder heights. Was it the vibrations of their song that made the floor quiver beneath Kane's feet?

Kane with shaking fingers began to unbar the door. Naught to do now but to rush out barehanded and die beside the girl he could not save. Then his gaze was blocked by a giant form which shouldered in front of the door. A huge man, a chief by his bearing and apparel, leaned idly against the wall as he watched the proceedings. Kane's heart gave a great leap. This was too good to be true! Thrust in the chief's girdle was the pistol that he himself had carried! He knew that his weapons must have been divided among his captors. This pistol meant nothing to the chief, but he must have been taken by its strange shape and was carrying it as savages will wear useless trinkets. Or perhaps he thought it a sort of war-club. At any rate, there it was. And again' floor and building seemed to tremble.

Kane pulled the door silently inward and crouched in the shadows behind his victim like a great brooding tiger.

His brain worked swiftly and formulated his plan of action. There was a dagger in the girdle beside the pistol; the chief's back was turned squarely to him and he must strike from the left to reach the heart and silence him quickly. All this passed through Solomon's brain in a flash as he crouched.

The chief was not aware of his foe's presence until Kane's lean right hand shot across his shoulder and clamped on his mouth, jerking him backward. At the same instant the Puritan's left hand tore the dagger from the girdle and with one desperate plunge sank the keen blade home.

The warrior crumpled without a sound and in an instant Kane's pistol was in its owner's hand. A second's investigation showed that it was still loaded and the flint still in place. No one had seen the swift murder. Those few who stood near the doorway were all facing the Black Altar, enwrapped in the drama, which was there unfolding. As Kane stepped across the corpse, the chanting of the dancers ceased abruptly. In the instant of silence which followed, Kane heard, above the pounding of his own pulse, the night wind rustle the death-like plumes of the masked horror beside the altar. A rim of the moon glowed above the spire. Then, from high up on the face of the Tower of Death, a deep voice boomed out in a strange chant. Mayhap the priest who spoke behind the skull knew not what his words meant, but Kane believed that he at least mimicked the very intonation of those long-dead Atlantean acolytes. Deep, mystic, resonant the voice sounded out, like the endless flowing of long tides on the broad white beaches.

The masked one beside the altar drew himself up to his great height and raised a long, glimmering blade. Kane recognized his own sword, even as he levelled his pistol and fired--not at the masked priest but full at the skull which gleamed in the face of the tower. For in one blinding flash of intuition he remembered the dying Atlantean's words: "Their brains hinge on the skull of Nakura!"

Simultaneously with the crack of the pistol came a shattering crash; the dry skull flew into a thousand pieces and vanished, and behind it the chant broke off short in a death shriek. The rapier fell from the hand of the masked priest and many of the dancers crumpled to the earth, the others halting short, spellbound. Through the deathly silence which reigned for an instant, Kane rushed toward the altar; then all Hell broke loose.

A babel of bestial screams rose to the shuddering stars. For centuries only their faith in the dead Nakura had held together the blooddrenched brains of

the savage Negari. Now their symbol had vanished, had been blasted into nothing before their eyes. It was to them as if the skies had split, the moon fallen and the world ended. All the red visions which lurked at the backs of their corroded brains leaped into fearful life, all the latent insanity which was their heritage rose to claim its own, and Kane looked upon a whole nation turned to bellowing maniacs.

Screaming and roaring they turned on each other, men and women, tearing with frenzied fingernails, stabbing with spears with daggers, beating each other with the flaming torches, while over all rose the roar of frantic human beasts.

With clubbed pistol Kane battered his way through the surging, writhing ocean of flesh, to the foot of the altar stairs. Nails raked him, knives slashed at him, torches scorched his garments, but he paid no heed.

Then as he reached the altar, a terrible figure broke from the struggling mass and charged him. Nakari, queen of Negari, crazed as any of her subjects, rushed upon the Englishman with dagger bared and eyes horribly aflame.

"You shall not escape this time!" she was screaming, but before she reached him a great warrior, dripping blood and blind from a gash across his eyes, reeled across her path and lurched into her. She screamed like a wounded cat and struck her dagger into him, and then groping hands closed on her. The blind giant whirled her on high with one dying effort, and her last scream knifed the din of battle as Nakari, last queen of Negari, crashed against the stones of the altar and fell shattered and dead at Kane's feet. Kane sprang up the black steps, worn deep by the feet of myriad priests and victims, and as he came, the masked figure, who had stood like one turned to stone, came suddenly to life. He bent swiftly, caught up the sword he had dropped and thrust savagely at the charging Englishman. But the dynamic quickness of Solomon Kane was such as few men could match. A twist and sway of his steely body and he was inside the thrust, and as the blade slid harmlessly between arm and chest, he brought down the heavy pistol barrel among the waving plumes, crushing headdress, mask and skull with one

blow. Then ere he turned to the fainting girl who lay bound on the altar, he flung aside the shattered pistol and snatched his stolen sword from the nerveless hand which still grasped it, feeling a fierce thrill of renewed confidence at the familiar feel of the hilt. Marilyn lay white and silent, her death-like face turned blindly to the light of the moon which shone calmly down on the frenzied scene. At first Kane thought her to be dead, but his searching fingers detected a faint flutter of pulse. He cut her bonds and lifted her tenderlyâ€”only to drop her again and whirl as a hideous, blood-stained figure of insanity came leaping and gibbering up the steps. Full upon Kane's outthrust blade the creature ran, and toppled back into the red swirl below, clawing beast-like at its mortal wound. Then beneath Kane's feet the altar rocked; a sudden tremor hurled him to his knees and his horrified eyes beheld the Tower of Death sway to and fro. Some horror of Nature was taking place, and this fact pierced the crumbling brains of the fiends who fought and screamed below. A new element entered into their shrieking, and then the Tower of Death swayed far out with a terrible and awesome majestyâ€”broke from the rocking crags andâ€”gave way with a thunder of crashing worlds. Great stones and shards of masonry came raining down, bringing death and destruction to hundreds of screaming humans below. One of these stones crashed to pieces on the altar beside Kane, showering him with dust.

"Earthquake!" he gasped, and smitten by this new terror he caught up the senseless girl and plunged recklessly down the cracking steps, hacking and stabbing a way through the crimson whirlpools of bestial humanity that still tore and ravened. The rest was a red nightmare in which Kane's dazed brain refused to record all its horrors. It seemed that for screaming crimson centuries he reeled through narrow winding streets where bellowing, screeching demons battled and died, among titanic walls and black columns that rocked against the sky and crashed to ruin about him, while the earth heaved and trembled beneath his staggering feet and the thunder of crashing towers filled the world.

Gibbering fiends in human shape clutched and clawed at him, to fade before his flailing sword, and falling stones bruised and battered him. He crouched as he reeled along, covering the girl with his body as best he

could, sheltering her alike from blind stone and blinder human.

At last, when it seemed mortal endurance had reached its limit, he saw the great black outer wall of the city loom before him, rent from earth to parapet and tottering for its fall. He dashed through a crevice, and gathering his efforts, made one last sprint. And scarce was he out of reach than the wall crashed, falling inward like a great black wave.

The night wind was in his face and behind him rose the clamour of the doomed city as Kane staggered down the hill path that trembled beneath his feet.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FAITH OF SOLOMON

Dawn lay like a cool white hand on the brow of Solomon Kane. The nightmares faded from his soul as he breathed deep of the morning wind which blew up from the jungle far below his feet--a wind laden with the musk of decaying vegetation. Yet it was like the breath of life to him, for the scents were those of the clean natural disintegration of outdoor things, not the loathsome aura of decadent antiquity that lurks in the walls of eon-old cities--Kane shuddered involuntarily.

He bent over the sleeping girl who lay at his feet, arranged as comfortably as possible with the few soft tree branches he had been able to find for her bed. Now she opened her eyes and stared about wildly for an instant; then as her gaze met the face of Solomon, lighted by one of his rare smiles, she gave a little sob of thankfulness and clung to him.

"Oh. Captain Kane! Have we in truth escaped from yon fearful city? Now it seems all like a dream--after you fell through the secret door in my chamber Nakari later went to your dungeon as she told me--"and returned in vile humour. She said you were a fool, for she had offered you the kingdom of the world and you had but insulted her. She screamed and raved and cursed like one insane and swore that she would yet, alone, build a great empire of Negari.

Then she turned on me and reviled me, saying that you held me--a slave--in more esteem than a queen and all her glory. And in spite of my pleas she took me across her knees and whipped me until I swooned.

"Afterward I lay half senseless for a long time, and was only dimly aware that men came to Nakari and said that you had escaped. They said you were a sorcerer, for you faded through a solid wall like a ghost. But Nakari killed the men who had brought you from the cell, and for hours she was like a wild beast.

"How long I lay thus I know not. In those terrible rooms and corridors where no natural sunlight ever entered, one lost all track of time. But from the time you were captured by Nakari and the time that I was placed on the altar, at least a day and a night and another day must have passed. It was only a few hours before the sacrifice that word came you had escaped.

"Nakari and her Star-maidens came to prepare me for the rite." At the bare memory of that fearful ordeal she whimpered and hid her face in her hands. "I must have been drugged " I only know that they clothed me in the white robe of the sacrifice and carried me into a great black chamber filled with horrid statues.

"There I lay for a space like one in a trance, while the women performed various strange and shameful rites according to their grim religion. Then I fell into a swoon, and when I emerged I was lying bound on the Black Altar--the torches were tossing and the devotees chanting--behind the Tower of Death the rising moon was beginning to glow--all this I knew faintly, as in a deep dream. And as in a dream I saw the glowing skull high on the tower--and the gaunt, naked priest holding a sword above my heart, then I knew no more. What happened?"

"At about that moment," Kane answered, "I emerged from a building wherein I had wandered by mistake, and blasted their hellish skull to atoms with a pistol ball. Whereupon, all these people, being cursed from birth by demons, and being likewise possessed of devils, fell to slaying one another, in the midst of the tumult an earthquake cometh to pass which shakes the walls down. Then I snatch you up, and running at random, come upon a rent in the outer wall and thereby escape, carrying you, who seem in a swoon.

"Once only you awoke, after I had crossed the Bridge-Across-the-Sky, as the people of Negari called it, which was crumbling beneath our feet by reason of the earthquake. After I had come to these cliffs, but dared not descend them in the darkness, the moon being nigh to setting by that time, you awoke and screamed and clung to me, whereupon I soothed you as best I might, and after a time you fell into a natural sleep."

"And now what?" asked the girl.

"England!" Kane's deep eyes lighted at the word. "I find it hard to remain in the land of my birth for more than a month at a time; yet though I am cursed with the wanderlust, 'tis a name which ever rouses a glow in my bosom. And how of you, child?"

"Oh heaven!" she cried, clasping her small hands. "Home! Something of which to be dreamed--never attained, I fear. Oh Captain Kane, how shall we gain through all the vast leagues of jungle which lie between this place and the coast?"

"Marylin," said Kane gently, stroking her curly hair, "methinks you lack somewhat in faith, both in Providence and in me. Nay, alone I am a weak creature, having no strength or might in me; yet in times past hath God made me a great vessel of wrath and a sword of deliverance. And, I trust, shall do so again.

"Look you, little Marylin: in the last few hours as it were, we have seen the passing of an evil race and the fall of a foul empire. Men died by thousands about us, and the earth rose beneath our feet, hurling down towers that broke the heavens; yea, death fell about us in a red rain, yet we escaped unscathed.

"Therein is more than the hand of man! Nay, a Power--the mightiest Power! That which guided me across the world, straight to that demon city--which led me to your chamber--which aided me to escape again and led me to the one man in all the city who would give the information I must have, the strange, evil priest of an elder race who lay dying in a subterranean cell--and which guided me to the outer wall, as I ran blindly and at random--for should I have come under the cliffs which formed the rest of the wall, we had surely perished. That same Power brought us safely out of the dying city, and safe across the rocking bridge--which shattered and sundered down into the chasm just as my feet touched solid earth!

"Think you that having led me this far, and accomplished such wonders, the Power will strike us down now? Nay! Evil flourishes and rules in the cities of men and the waste places of the world, but anon the great giant that is God rises and smites for the righteous, and they lay faith in him."

"I say this: this cliff shall we descend in safety, and yon dank jungle traverse in safety, and it is as sure that in old Devon your people shall clasp you again to their bosom, as that you stand here." And now for the first time Marilyn smiled, with the quick eagerness of a normal young girl, and Kane sighed in relief. Already the ghosts were fading from her haunted eyes, and Kane looked to the day when her horrible experiences should be as a dimming dream. One glance he flung behind him, where beyond the scowling hills the lost city of Negari lay shattered and silent, amid the ruins of her own walls and the fallen crags which had kept her invincible so long, but which had at last betrayed her to her doom.

A momentary pang smote him as he thought of the myriad of crushed, still forms lying amid those ruins; then the blasting memory of their evil crimes surged over him and his eyes hardened.

"And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare; for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake.

"For Thou hast made of a city an heap; of a defended city a ruin; a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built.

"Moreover, the multitude of Thy strangers shall be like small dust and the multitude of the terrible ones shall be as chaff that passeth suddenly away; yea, it shall be at an instant suddenly.

"Stay yourselves and wonder; cry ye out and cry; they are drunken but not with wine; they stagger but not with strong drink.

"Verily, Marylin," said Kane with a sigh, "with mine own eyes have I seen the prophecies of Isaiah come to pass. They were drunken but not with wine. Nay, blood was their drink and in that red flood they dipped deep and terribly."

Then taking the girl by the hand he started toward the edge of the cliff. At this very point had he ascended in the night--how long ago it seemed.

Kane's clothing hung in tatters about him. He was torn, scratched and bruised. But in his eyes shone the clear calm light of serenity as the sun came up, flooding cliffs and jungle with a golden light that was like a promise of joy and happiness.

Mac OS X 2 RTEXTTR*ch

A free ebook from <http://manybooks.net/>